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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [PKISL](#) [SA](#)
SUBJECT: PETITION SUPPORTS MINISTRY OF CULTURE AND
INFORMATION AGAINST ISLAMIC CONSERVATIVE INTERNET CAMPAIGN

REF: A. A) RIYADH 8723
[B. B\) RIYADH 5136](#)
[C. C\) RIYADH 7191](#)

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Michael Gfoeller for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

[1. \(C\) SUMMARY:](#) The Ministry of Culture and Information received a petition signed by 160 reform-minded scholars supporting Minister of Information Iyad bin Amin Madany. The signatories constituted a broad cross-section of Saudi society, including men and women, Sunni and Shi'a. The statement responded to a recent Internet campaign by Islamic conservatives criticizing the Ministry and calling for the Minister's dismissal. It supported the Minister's efforts to open Saudi society and bridge the gap with the "West." The statement called for the prosecution of the religious conservatives behind the campaign in order to end the exploitation of religion and preserve the development of Saudi Arabia. END SUMMARY.

[2. \(U\)](#) During the Eid holiday, the Ministry of Culture and Information received a petition signed by 160 reform-minded scholars supporting Minister of Information Iyad bin Amin Madany. The petition was also posted on a liberal Saudi-based website "Al-Hurriyah." The signatories included Shi'a and Sunni men and women from all major provinces in the Kingdom (Ref A).

[3. \(U\)](#) The petition responded to a recent Internet campaign by Islamic conservatives criticizing the Ministry's programs and demanding the dismissal of the Minister and several other officials. A campaign supporter publicly stated that the Ministry tends to "exclude Islamic thoughts" from its liberal and secular programming. The petition rejected this campaign, calling it "blackmail" and "intellectual terrorism."

[4. \(U\)](#) The statement supported the Minister and highlighted the successes achieved during his tenure, specifically noting increased openness in the media, as well as greater cultural awareness in Saudi society. The statement pointed to increased publication and marketing of books and newspapers as key to enhancing overall cultural awareness in Saudi Arabia. The statement also commended the Minister for his efforts in aligning Saudi Arabia's cultural norms with those of the "free world (the West)."

[5. \(U\)](#) While stressing that there is a need for public criticism, the statement's authors accused Islamic conservatives of criticizing the Government as a means to preserve their radical ideologies, as opposed to serving the national interest or common good. It noted, "the discourse of denial, which hides behind patriotism and public interest while the vocabulary of the speech aims at preserving the private sectarian and ideological interests in accordance with the sentiments and backgrounds of the groups aiming at

social power and guardianship, is totally rejected."

¶6. (S) The statement advocated for the prosecution of those behind the campaign, claiming that such efforts hinder the development of Saudi Arabia and falsely exploit religion. It said that the campaign inaccurately accused government agencies, including the Ministry of Labor, the Ministry of Culture and Information, and the Saudi Arabia General Investment Authority, of conducting acts of "treason" and unfairly called them a "westernization gang" due to their innovative reforms and activities. The statement's authors wrote, "We strongly call for prosecuting those who talk about intentions, those who hinder the path of economic and human development, especially as they emanate from false religious backgrounds." The statement added that by prosecuting these groups, "we not only remove an obstacle in the way of the country's development, but we also free religion from those who claim to represent it and religious radicals who use it to serve their narrow, personal aims." (NOTE: The criticism of the groups in this statement is reminiscent of claims made by 61 religious conservatives in the May counterreformation manifesto (Ref B), as well as the controversial lecture given at the summer youth camp by Sheikh al-Break in August (Ref C). END NOTE.)

¶7. (C) A Ministry of Foreign Affairs interlocutor told PolOff on November 7 that the increase in media outlets and media debates over the past few years -- a result of reforms implemented by the Ministry of Culture and Information -- has shaped the increasing openness of Saudi society. He indicated that the public benefits from the Ministry of Culture and Information's programming. He also commented that the opinions in Saudi newspapers are not accurate reflections of the Saudi public, and that newspaper readership is low overall. However, when the Ministry's

messages reach mosque sermons, as is often the case, then the issues are robustly debated. He concluded that this Internet campaign against the Ministry most likely occurred as a result of mosque sermons about some of the Ministry's activities.

¶8. (C) COMMENT: That the petition was posted on-line and the issue hotly debated in the mainstream media is a clear example of the progress that the Ministry of Information has made with its reform efforts. Although Islamic conservatives are likely to continue in their opposition to many of the Ministry's programs, public support for the Ministry in this case is a good indicator that some sectors of Saudi society are open to such reform. END COMMENT.
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